

The Perestroika movement and tension within Political Science

The social movement within academia, the Perestroika movement, still has deep influences on Political Science to this day. This paper will not only discuss this movement within an academic discipline, but will look into the possible tension between the 'main' goals of the discipline: scientific knowledge and policy knowledge, while expressing my own opinion on these subjects as well.

The reformist Perestroika movement within Political Science must be examined before one can look at the possible tension between the discipline's 'goals.' On October 15, 2000, it all began with a letter from 'Mr. Perestroika' outlining a “political science manifesto” which called out the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the American Political Science Review (APSR) for: neglecting famous political scientists, being dominated by 'East Coast brahmins,' ignoring the diversity within “knowledges and methodologies present in the study of politics” and having a leadership which dominated by white and male members (Perestroika, 1-2). Additionally they opposed such political science institutions for promoting “free market models of economics,” among other points, in hopes of leading to the dismantling of the purported 'Orwellian system' and spreading perestroika spread across the discipline (Perestroika, 1-2).

It is important to recognize that these demands, even if seemingly radical, were part of this reformist revolution and did not look to overturn the full discipline of political science, but rather criticized a smaller but important sector of the political science community in academia in the United States. It set off a firestorm, resulting in people organizing around similar principles in the UK and France, but only with an organized movement in the United States which seemed to “articulate the suppressed dissatisfactions of a significant portion of the profession” of political science (Rudolph, 12). It is important to recognize and reject the critical views of political scientist Stephen Bennett, almost speaking like a powerful leader after destroying a social movement, declaring: “hubris may define certain kinds of academic movements, but it does not make successful protests” (Bennett, 179).¹ This

¹ While some of Bennett's criticisms should be considered, his brash rejection of the perestroika movement within political science should be flatly rejected and denounced.

movement was seemingly a reaction to “the mathematicization” of the economics discipline. In their view, this change in the discipline had “taken a hegemonic role in research, publication...teaching” and in quantitative methods which were used “in American political science research, curricula, journals, and positions,” resulting in “exclusion of qualitative and interpretive approaches” (Kinnwall, 21-22 and Yanow, Schwartz-Shea, 741).²

It seems that there is a present tension between stated 'goals' of political science: scientific knowledge and policy knowledge. It is important to recognize that as political scientist David Easton famously wrote in 1969 that “...the talents of political scientists have been put in the service largely of the elites in society, in government, business, the military and voluntary organizations” with little “communication and contact with those who characteristically benefit least from the fruits of modern industrial society” which are “least able to command the resources of expertise for which political science stands” (Easton, 1059-1060). Easton says that it is the “social responsibility” of political scientists to “rectify the imbalance” (1059-1060). With this context, it is important to look at the tensions between these goals. David Wearing writes in *The Guardian* that while “learning from the disciplines of “hard science”, where appropriate, can certainly yield benefits,” but that political science cannot be value-free or non-political, meaning that “the intellectual rigor of our work is bound to be enhanced by our explicitly accounting for how it is shaped by our own politics and moral values.”

Choosing the main goal of the academic discipline of political science is not an easy task. Scientific knowledge and policy knowledge are seen as the two main 'goals' of the discipline. But, it is silly and ridiculous to choose only between two 'goals' which were not even collectively or democratically decided by the discipline itself.³ There should be a deeper goal of the discipline.

Wearing articulates this in part, writing that “the contribution to wider political discourse of scholarship

² They believed this could be remedied by “less hegemony and more flexibility in research opportunities, curricula, and career opportunities,” which has resulted in more comparative methods to this day

³ My professor asked if this could happen in a free anarchic environment. I would say that such an idea is a nice intellectual one, but my call for goals to be democratically and/or collectively by those in the political science discipline is speaking about doing so within the existing discipline, not in some hypothetical.

that challenges power is crucial in a functioning democracy.” Political science should not only include this challenge to the centers of power, but should have a deeper purpose: to be subversive, challenging societal notions including taking subjective stands against moral atrocities, all while rejecting private and government influence in the discipline, instead working for the common good of humanity itself.

Works cited

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